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ABSTRACT

This report is a narrative account of the development of community involvement at Park School, Toronto, following the conflict which developed in the late 1960's and which reached its peak in 1970. In Park School, the process of community involvement has been characterized by bitterness, hostility, and distrust. After September 1970, with the assignment of new personnel and the formation of new structures--the Task Force and the Park School/Community Council--a new context of school-community relations was created. In this context, new programs were developed in an attempt to overcome the crucial problems of low reading ability and the isolation of the school from its surrounding community. The basic problem remains at Park, as at other inner city schools--children from working-class homes simply do not do as well in school as middle-class children do; the correlation between low occupational category and placement in special education programs has been paralleled by a similar correlation between attendance at inner city schools and both low scores on reading tests and placement in two-year secondary school programs. What is generally agreed to be a basic cause is that the home and the school in low socio-economic areas are engaged in a conflict of values. [Due to the quality of the original, parts of this document are only marginally legible.] (Author/JM)

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PARENTS AND PROJECTS
AT PARK SCHOOL

Greg Cable

#107

RESEARCH SERVICE

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Project Directed by E. N. Wright

THE BOARD OF EDUCATION FOR THE CITY OF TORONTO

PREFACE

Over the past few years, citizens have become increasingly involved in the operations of the social institutions which govern, educate and assist them. In the public mind, the movement for participation in these institutions in Toronto is associated with one particular area of the City. In that area is Park School.

In some schools in the Toronto system, the process of community involvement has been characterized by friendly co-operation in the quiet resolution of problems. Park has not been one of these. There, the process has been characterized by bitterness, hostility and distrust, all exposed by the glare of extensive media coverage. The problems at Park were identified as long as fifty years ago in a report issued by The Bureau of Municipal Research*: the recently proposed solutions to these continuing problems have been somewhat unique and, in one case, supported by funds from a source outside the Board of Education.

This report is a narrative account of the development of community involvement at Park, following the conflict which developed in the late 1960's and which reached its peak in 1970. After September, 1970, with the assignment of new personnel and the formation of new structures (the Task Force and the Park School/Community Council), a new context of school-community relations was created. In this context, new programmes were developed in an attempt to overcome the crucial problems of low reading ability and the isolation of the school from its surrounding community.

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* The Bureau of Municipal Research. Park School. Toronto: 1921

A note should be made here on sources. Many of the facts surrounding the events of the past few years are buried in the minutes of numerous committees, councils and Boards;** many are found only in the personal files and memories of the individuals involved. With the hope that their collective memories would contribute to a more accurate report, interviews were conducted with most of the people concerned, on all sides of the issues. Their willingness to be interviewed and to make available their own documents, notes and letters was greatly appreciated.

GREG CABLE,
Research Assistant.

** More specifically, primary sources include: the Minutes of the Toronto Board of Education (1969-72); various reports and briefs submitted to the Board and its committees (available through the Assistant Secretary's Office); and the Minutes of the Park School/Community Council and its subcommittees (available through the Secretary of the Council).

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THE COMMUNITY

> "The Park School is the centre of a community which, of course, differs in some respects from any other in the city, and greatly from many."
>
> (The Bureau of Municipal Research, Park School, 1921, p. 32)

The Regent Park-Trefann Court neighbourhoods, popularly known as "Cabbagetown," are low-income, working-class areas in the east-central part of Toronto. The area stretches north from Queen Street to Gerrard, between Parliament Street and the Don River, and is characterized by a higher incidence of delinquency, welfare recipiency and public housing than is found in other parts of the City.

Prior to the late 1960's, political activity within the community consisted of perhaps voting every few years and, if necessary, dealing with political agents at the purely local level. At the public, governmental level the residents exercised little power since the system of federal-provincial constituency and municipal ward boundaries linked the working-class area to the wealthy, middle-class Rosedale area further north. Given the heterogeneity of political opinion in the south and the relative homogeneity of opinion in the north, Rosedale voters were usually the deciding factor in elections and thus had the louder voice in the councils of government. The voice of the south, however, grew louder in 1966.

Beginning in the 1940's, Regent Park had been redeveloped through the construction of public housing units (hi- and low-rise apartment blocks as well as row housing) operated by the Ontario Housing Corporation. Trefann Court, an area of old, often dilapidated houses and shops just south of Regent Park, had also been slated for redevelopment, but it was

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not until 1966 that the Toronto City Council produced a plan. The Council announced its intention to expropriate the Trefann homes, bulldoze the area to the ground, replace the buildings with an OHC development on part of the land, and sell the rest to private developers.

The residents of Trefann Court, aware of the expropriation difficulties experienced in a neighbouring community, Don Mount, just east of the Don River, fought the City on the expropriation issue. At first they simply asked a fair price for their homes but eventually they demanded the rehabilitation of the area, in which they would have a say, rather than its "renewal" (i.e. levelling). The intransigence of City Hall to proposed changes in the Trefann Court Plan, as recommended by a residents' brief to the Council in November, 1966, led the residents to increasing militancy. After two years of indecision, the Council dropped the original proposal and began to formulate a new plan which they thought would be agreeable to the residents. For two more years the arguments went on, with no new plan in sight.

During these years, the residents were organized into an effective force for fighting City Hall with the help of a number of community workers fielded by the Toronto Community Union Project. Eventually, the residents won a place next to City officials on a planning committee for Trefann Court, a victory greatly helped by an earlier success of the residents in having the municipal ward boundaries redrawn.

In 1969, alterations in the structure of the City government necessitated a new boundary system based on a change from nine to eleven wards. The system endorsed by City Council was a "strip" plan, drawn up by the City Clerk, which organized the new wards into blocks of homogeneous population and interest in the north, east and west ends of the City, but

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organized the central core into long, thin strips which maintained the conjunction of affluent areas north of Bloor Street with less affluent areas to the south. This "strip" plan was also endorsed by the Toronto Board of Education.

Groups in Regent Park and surrounding areas perceived the plan to be a deliberate attempt to deny them their distinct voice in the City government, and asked that a total "block" plan, also prepared by the City Clerk, be instituted instead. The fight ended when the Ontario Municipal Board, after hearing both the City's and the residents' arguments, ordered that the "block" plan be implemented. In the 1969 election, fought on the new boundaries, the area exercised its new voice by electing vociferous reformers to both the City Council and the Board of Education, an indication of the radicalization brought about by the reaction of municipal bodies to the desires of the residents.

Those reactions had served to reinforce feelings always apparent in a great number of people in the area -- that the "system," whether by conscious design or by the inevitable unfolding of its basic nature, is out to "screw" them; that governments and institutions exist to serve another class, the middle-class; and that anyone who works for those institutions is worthy at least of suspicion, or of a quiet, instinctive hostility.

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THE SCHOOL

> "The school is a typical academic school doing good work under its limitations but producing results for the community falling far short of the ideal or even the possible."
>
> (Park School, 1921, p. 32)

Park School is situated halfway between Parliament and River Streets, on Shuter Street, the dividing line between south Regent Park and Trefann Court. One building and a number of portables house approximately one thousand pupils attending the junior school (junior kindergarten to grade 6) and the senior school (grades 7 - 8), which takes pupils from its own and three other junior schools. Prior to 1970, one principal administered both schools, each of which had its own vice-principal.

Throughout the early part of the 1960's, interaction between Park School and its community consisted mainly of the one sending out report cards and the other returning them. Teachers and parents lived in seeming unawareness of each other's goals and needs. During the latter part of the decade, however, a few tentative actions were taken to overcome this ignorance.

The first important move in the process was the assignment of a full-time social worker to Park in September, 1964, the first in the Toronto system to be attached solely to one school. The Advisory Committee to the Child Adjustment Services, which first recommended the appointment to Park as a pilot project, saw the social worker as serving a liaison function between the school and parents, and between parents and community agencies, while also acting as a consultant to the school staff. Originally working only on an individual case basis, in 1966 he also assumed responsibility for attendance at Park and three nearby high schools.

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A second move was the creation of a Drop-In-Club in 1966. After discussions between the social worker, and a small group of teachers, one of the school's basic problems was identified as an overwhelming lack of interest in education on the part of the children. In an attempt to overcome these poor attitudes, the Drop-In-Club was set up so that the children could talk to teachers on a one-to-one basis and, hopefully, come to see them as more than distant authority figures uninterested in anything but plowing through the curriculum. The Club was also designed to be an educational experience for the teachers, who had had little contact with the community and were, for the most part, unaware of the social problems which their pupils experienced. By all accounts, the Club was a great success and survived for four years with the full support of the principal, Ross McGillawee, and of the eight teachers involved, and with financial backing from the Board for its last two years.

In 1968-69, a number of programmes were initiated for the purpose of involving the school with the broader community: adult education courses in math, typing and art were organized with the help of the newly-formed and federally-funded Regent Park Community Improvement Association; a community newspaper, the Regent Bell, was published at the school, although it was not specifically concerned with school matters; and a vice-principal organized coffee parties at neighbourhood homes to discuss pre-school education. Formed in the same year was the Park Parents Group, organized by a social worker for the Metropolitan Children's Aid Society, a probation officer of the Juvenile and Family Court, and Park's social worker. The purpose of this group was to bring multiple problem families into the school setting to discuss family problems. In the first year the focus was on parents whose children had been before Juvenile Court and, in the second, on single parent families.

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Despite these tentative bridges to the community, however, a large number of parents continued to feel alienated from the school. Based on their own past experiences, many area parents had an ambivalent attitude toward the school, part hostility, part deference. In touch with it only when their children were to be disciplined or transferred to Opportunity Classes, these parents felt as strangers when entering the building, unwelcome and unwanted.

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THE CONFLICT AT THE SCHOOL

> "A virile, adaptable and progressive public school policy, keeping pace with the changing needs of society was never so essential. The best guarantee of such a policy is an informed public, in a position to co-operate effectively with and, where necessary, to bring the necessary pressure to bear on Departments and Boards of Education."
>
> (Park School, 1921, p. 6)

By 1968, it was readily apparent that there existed in Park's community a feeling that the school and the school system itself were not adequately serving the children of that community. It was actually a suspicion of the unknown, for few parents were aware of the school's procedures or of the classifications and regulations which followed their children through school. Beginning in the fall of that year, however, a group of mothers from Trefann Court, some of whom were active in the housing fight with City Council, began meeting once a week to talk about their children, the school and the system generally. They also talked to officials of the Board administration, particularly those concerned with the Opportunity Class programme operated for the "educable mentally retarded." With more information, their vague disenchantment with the educational process became pointed criticism.

Although the Trefann mothers provided a focus for community hostility toward the school, they held no monopoly on criticism. One of the few people on the school staff to be in a position to guage the depth of community feeling, the social worker organized a series of meetings between parents and teachers in an attempt to head off the growing opposition. These meetings were, as one teacher put it, "mindblowing," for, despite warnings as to what could be expected, the teachers were unprepared for the degree of hostility expressed by the parents. In the parents' view, their children

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were being shipped to "Opportunity" Classes and streamed into technical-vocational courses by an arbitrary bureaucracy which assumed that their children were dumb; their children were not learning basic reading and writing skills at the elementary level and were not, therefore, prepared for secondary school, let alone post-secondary education; and the blame for this rested on inexperienced, unqualified teachers and poor teaching methods.

This attack on their profession, their employer, and their own worth and abilities made teachers nervous, defensive and hostile toward the parents, and did little for morale in the short-term. For this reason the meetings were discontinued by the administration. In the long-term, though, they seem to have fulfilled part of their purpose as the first step in bringing the school and community closer together. Out of these meetings, described by one teacher as "the first dent in a big boil," came a re-evaluation of the teachers' own perceptions and prejudices as well as the first suggestion of a committee or council where parents and teachers could meet to discuss both school and community problems on a regular basis.

But before any ameliorative measures came into play, community distrust became more sharply defined. The Trefann Court Mothers came to hold such a dim view of the educational establishment that they formed their own school in the fall of 1969. Originally begun in the summer as part of the Varsity Downtown Education Project financed by the University of Toronto Students' Administrative Council, Laneway School was developed to offer a highly structured programme devoted to teaching reading and writing skills mainly to "refugees" from Opportunity Classes. Run by a Board of Governors made up of teachers and parents, Laneway enrolled approximately twelve pupils withdrawn from Park, many of whom frequently moved back and forth between the two schools.

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Also in 1969, one of the Trefann Court Mothers made an unsuccessful bid to become school trustee in the new Ward 7. During her campaign many questions were raised concerning Opportunity Classes, and these were given extensive coverage by The Globe and Mail, which ran a series of articles over the summer of that year reflecting the Trefann point of view. All this served to move the conflict surrounding Park School to the level of the Board itself.

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THE PAPER WAR

> "...the indifference of their own children to school life...is often attributed by the parents to the school system itself, its curriculum and the methods of presenting the subjects taught....It can hardly be claimed that the school system has been entirely free from blame in this subject...."
>
> (Park School, 1921, p. 17)

At a meeting of the Board's Management Committee in September, 1969, the Director of Education was requested

> "...to report on how children are admitted to opportunity classes, what special education is provided, and the desirability of reducing the number of opportunity classes or abolishing them."
>
> (Minutes, September 2, 1969)

The seven page report* submitted in November gave answers to these questions in very general terms. It stated that children were admitted to Opportunity Classes only after a comprehensive, individual psychological evaluation and consultation with the principal and teacher; that the removal of the child from the regular programme with which he could not cope allowed for "an individual program at the child's own instructional level in each part of the curriculum" (p. 2); that the number of self-contained Opportunity Classes had been declining due to the implementation of a "withdrawal" programme; and that although total abolition of the programme had been considered, placement in a self-contained room still seemed "to be the best answer to the needs of many children of very limited ability and to the needs of many children who are unable to function as part of a larger group" (p. 5).

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* Sweetman and Gore. Report to Management Committee. Toronto Board of Education, November 13, 1969.

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This report was not officially "received" by the Management Committee until February 10, 1970. At the same meeting, the newly-elected trustees were given a brief* prepared by the group of mothers from Trefann Court in response to the report. The Mothers' Brief described the November document as "little better than a fairy tale." (p. 1), and criticized the report for failing to clearly define such terms as "learning difficulties"; for failing to list the factors considered in Opportunity Class placement or the precise nature of the psychological examination; and for failing to outline the nature of the curriculum taught in the special classes. As a counter to the report's generalities, the Brief marshalled statistics intended to show that whatever skills were learned in the classes lead to "unskilled jobs or no job at all" (p. 6); that placement in Opportunity Classes and Vocational Programmes was related to parental income -- that "it appears as if the school system directly discriminates against children from poor families" (p. 12); and that teachers in the lower socio-economic areas of the City were less experienced than those in other areas.

Maintaining that the children in Opportunity Classes were "excluded from the basic social life of the school" (p. 1) the mothers said that these children, despite the fact that in their own neighbourhoods they seemed "pretty bright" were mocked and ridiculed as "dummies" and "retards."

> "What we are increasingly led to think is that the school system -- with the Opportunity Class as its dead-end division -- just isn't set up to be meaningful for our kids. It doesn't relate to the things they know or care about....So the kids slide away, and turn their minds and their hearts off. And those who turn off the most end up in Opportunity Class." (p. 2)

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* A Group of Mothers in Trefann Court. A Response to the Report of N. A. Sweetman and G. M. Gore on Opportunity Classes. February 10, 1970.

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The Brief raised a host of questions and demanded detailed answers. For example, the value of a programme allowing children to experience success at their own level was questioned by asking "if his own 'achievement level' is to be illiterate, is that OK?" (p. 7). It also asked for a comparison of the reading scores of children in different socio-economic areas of the City and suggested that the figures be tabulated by an "impartial observer," rather than by Board officials who had "a very substantial stake in the results" (p. 7).

The reaction of the Trustees to the Trefann Brief was to ask for yet another report giving the requested detailed answers. For the next five months the Special Education Department, with assistance from other Board personnel, gathered statistics and reports and produced a sixty page examination of special programmes. The report, issued June 3, 1970, examined the special classes in the context of the inner city programme and outlined the seven criteria -- income level, density of public housing, the rate of juvenile delinquency, socio-economic rank, economic achievement, household characteristics and social welfare -- used in arriving at the inner city designation. To be so designated, a school had to meet at least three of these criteria, in which case extra resources including personnel, supplies and equipment, would be provided. While a majority of the schools in the City met three criteria, the report suggested that the needs of these schools were not as great as those which met six criteria and not nearly as great as the two schools (Park and Regent Park) which met all seven criteria and exceeded the criterion of public housing rates.

The report outlined in much greater detail the procedures used for placement in Opportunity Classes, listing nine factors other than I.Q. test

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performance which were taken into account for assessment purposes, and included both a consultant's report as a sample of re-evaluation procedures and a composite Opportunity Class curriculum pointing out the emphasis placed on basic skills, particularly language development.

More germane to the thrust of the Mothers' Brief, the report gave figures which showed that teachers in inner city schools averaged 7 years experience, as compared to 9.7 years in non-inner city schools; that pupils attending inner city schools were more likely to enter vocational programmes; and that inner city pupils were also more likely to be placed in Opportunity Classes. The report attributed this overrepresentation to social factors, such as those represented by the inner city criteria, which could have a negative effect on school achievement, and, by extension to the curriculum, saying that

> "...while the curriculum offered in the school system is designed to develop in each child his maximum potential, this is his potential as it relates to his ability to succeed in the essentially middle-class world of higher education, business and industry. The charge is frequently made that this curriculum is not relevant to the child's own community and in a very broad sense this is true." (p. 9)

The report concluded that the problem was a social, rather than an educational one. For the school system itself, the problem was one of communication and differing perceptions; for while educators perceived the Special Education Programme as "a generous, comprehensive and imaginative response to the special needs of exceptional children" (p. 10), some inner city communities perceived it as a mechanism of oppression. In a model of understatement, the report noted that

> "the sincere and continuing efforts of the school system to communicate with the community of which each school is a part has been less than wholly successful,"

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and concluded

> "The school must become part of the community and the community must become one with the school." (p. 55)

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RESPONSES: THE TASK FORCE

> "The problems of education, however, are not simple, and are not to be solved without thought -- thought on the part of the people at large as well as of the elected bodies to whom they have deputed authority in educational matters."
>
> (Park School, 1921, p. 6)

To bridge the gap between the school and community, the June Report recommended the creation of a special Task Force, to be established "on the basis that the problem is not just one of education alone, but is one of society as a whole" (Minutes, 1970, p. 591). It was to be given a wide mandate to examine fifteen city-wide concerns as well as the special problems of the inner city and the inner city educational programme, and was to be staffed by "representatives of the community, the school system, government, and other community agencies."

In the minds of many in Park's community, the Task Force was suspect even before it was officially born. Firstly, it was conceived by the same College Street "experts" who some people in the community felt were expert only in delaying and obscuring "the real issues." Secondly, an inauspicious display of false labour took place at a special meeting of the Board at Castle Frank High School on June 29, called to consider the report and its recommendations. After some invited comments from the audience the meeting became sidetracked into political manoeuvring, lost its quorum, and no action could be taken on a motion to bring the Task Force into being -- not until two weeks later did it take its first official breath. Criticism was held in abeyance, however, as the Task Force slowly took shape.

One of the public school inspectors was appointed Chairman of the Task Force in August and gradually acquired a staff over the fall of 1970.

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These individuals, mainly from various departments of the Board, initially served on an informal basis since a budget for the Task Force had not yet been approved. The group set up offices not far from Park School and almost immediately ran into problems on both flanks. In November, the Board deferred consideration of a budget and of official appointments to the staff. From the community, wondering how the Task Force could discharge the massive responsibility which it had been given with but five members and no money, came more suspicion. This suspicion was particularly acute in the case of the Trefann Court group who believed that the Task Force was to work specifically with them, or at least with Park School. Although the Task Force did become heavily involved with Park, distrust was so great in the community that the Task Force had to expend a good deal of its time and energy establishing its credibility as a sincerely motivated group, honestly dedicated to overcoming, rather than obscuring, the problems of the school and community.

The basis of the group's approach to the problems of the inner city was the belief that the "cultural gap," between the school and the home, which the June Report had admitted was inherent in the school curriculum, manifested itself in the overrepresentation of inner city students in Opportunity Classes and Vocational courses. Mentioned briefly in the June Report, this overrepresentation was defined more sharply in December, 1970, with the publication of The Every Student Survey,* a report prepared by the Board's Research Department as a result of both the Trefann Court Mothers' Brief and a request from the Special Committee re Educating New Canadians. For the report, questionnaires were distributed to all students in

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* Wright, E. N. Student's Background and Its Relationship to Class and Programme in School (The Every Student Survey), 1970, (#91).

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the Toronto system asking for parent's occupation, country of birth and mother tongue. Occupation was coded according to a scale whose ranks attempt to combine both education and income for each occupational category.

The study found that

> "Starting with the categories 'Unemployed' and 'Welfare,' then 'Housewife' (mother only) and from there moving on an occupational scale from labourer to professional, there is a steady change in the proportions found by grade, programme and special class, the children of professionals being the most likely to be found in 5-year programmes and the least likely to be overage or in a special class." (p. 49)

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RESPONSES: THE PARK SCHOOL PROJECT

> "...the public schools of a city are social institutions rising to the best only where the sympathy and co-operation of the home, the school board and the municipal council are realized."
>
> (Chief Inspector Cowley's 1918 report, quoted in Park School, 1921, p. 6)

As a response to the particular problems of the school the Board launched what became known as the "Park School Project." One aspect of this was the infusion of extra personnel who could serve as a resource for both the school and the community as well as act as a buffer between the two estranged groups. Apart from resource teachers and consultants, senior personnel were assigned to Park by Child Adjustment Services, including a full-time senior psychologist, a new full-time social worker, still in the dual role of caseworker and attendance officer, an assistant psychologist for two-and-a-half days per week, and the chief psychiatric consultant for the Board for one-half day per week. The seniority of the personnel was emphasized as it was felt that they could stabilize the situation to a greater extent than could more junior staff.

Working as a team, the personnel concentrated on individual cases in their first year, clearing a backlog of problem pupils and becoming involved with individual parents and teachers. In the second year, the team shifted its attention to "mini-conferences" with teachers, parents and administrators, acting as a sounding-board for complaints as well as a resource.

The other aspect of the Park School Project involved the total split of the junior and senior school administrations. Although both schools had had their own vice-principals and administrative staffs, one principal

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was responsible for both schools. But when the principal, who had been at Park for eight years, put in for transfer to another school in the spring of 1970 and the question of his successor came before the Board, it was decided to carry the administrative split to its logical conclusion and appoint two principals. The new principals were instructed to co-ordinate their planning of goals and a programme for community involvement, and to meet with community organizations prior to September, 1970.

Although meetings with community groups did not take place, efforts were made to meet with individual parents soon after the beginning of the school year. Since one of the major complaints of the parents was that the school was too secretive about its operations and procedures, the junior school administration took the first step of inviting parents into the regular classrooms. Invitations were sent out asking the parents to arrange specific times when they could sit in on their children's classes and talk to their teachers. Two hundred and nine parents visited the classes between October 6 and 23, 1970.

A second step was taken on October 13, when letters were sent out asking parents if they would be interested in taking part in field trips. Almost ninety parents responded, fifty-three of whom said they would be interested and available, many others expressing interest but regretting that they could not spare the time. Two weeks later, another letter was sent out stating that the idea of volunteer parents working in the regular classrooms was being explored by the staff and that there would be a meeting for interested parents in early November. Over thirty parents responded to this letter. Out of all the respondents, a core group of from twelve to fifteen parents regularly took part in volunteer activities during the school year. The programme was expanded in the spring of 1971, and in June of that year ten

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parents began a training programme which included theoretical presentations by various officials of the Board, classroom observation and follow-up discussion. These parents began working in the school the following September. On the average, parents spent two to three half-days per week in the classrooms.

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RESPONSES: THE PARK SCHOOL/COMMUNITY COUNCIL

> "...recent changes...in favour of the social viewpoint in education, and the growth of Home and School Leagues give promise of improved relations between the home and the school."
>
> (Park School, 1921, p. 17)

Despite the moves taken in October to invite parents into the school, there remained some discontent in the community. At least one organized community group was dissatisfied that the new principals had not met with them. Five of the Trefann Court Mothers and their community worker went to Park and met with the junior school principal on November 2, 1970, and asked for the institution of a committee or council which would involve both parents and school personnel in discussions about school problems, an idea to which the principal agreed.

In order to develop concrete ideas as to how such a council could be organized, who its members would be, when it would meet or, indeed, why it should meet at all, they agreed that a general meeting should be called, to be attended by parents, teachers, ward trustees and other school principals in the area. Distrust was such that a neutral chairman, directly connected with neither the school nor the parents' groups, had to be found for the meeting. The chairman of the Task Force was the agreed choice.

The meeting, attended by fifty-nine people, was held at Dixon Hall on Sumach Street on November 19. Five parents and five teachers agreed to act under the chairman as a Planning Committee for the proposed Council. The committee met three times and, as a foretaste of the early Council meetings, its members found it difficult to work together. Much time was spent assigning the blame for poor achievement to each other and, alternately, defending themsevles from attack.

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Despite the atmosphere of hostility, the committee did reach agreement on the Council's organization. They agreed that it should have an executive made up of ten parents and five teachers, elected at a general meeting, by parents and teachers respectively. Although anyone in the larger community could attend the Council's meetings, only teachers at Park and parents with children at Park could sit on the executive body, whose basic function was to outline the parameters of, and call a general meeting for, discussion of any issue which either the school or the community brought to it. The Planning Committee's recommendations were approved and members of the executive were selected at a meeting on January 18, 1971. The nucleus of a committee structure emerged as small groups were formed for discussion of particular problems such as reading, discipline and communication between the home and the school.

Initially, the Council met twice a week, with one member of the executive acting as chairman on a rotational basis. Permanent co-chairmen, a parent and a teacher, were not chosen until early May. Rules of procedure, whereby comments from the floor were allowed only at times specified by the agenda and all discussion took place through the chairman, were adopted in an attempt to impose some order on discussions which, at least in the first few meetings, tended towards the anarchic.

Apart from the open hostility of its members, the Council faced other continuing problems, a major one being attendance at the meetings. Although membership was opened in mid-May to all residents living within the Park Senior School boundaries, teachers, administrators, and Task Force members almost always outnumbered parents. To publicize the Council, flyers were sent home with pupils, articles were written for neighbourhood and ward newspapers, and posters were placed in local shop windows, but attendance

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remained erratic. Teachers turned out in large numbers for some meetings, often worried and defensive about what was being discussed, while large numbers of parents turned out for others demanding action on specific problems. Charges and counter-charges that meetings had been "packed" or "rigged" contributed to the critical tone of discussions which many felt were generally unproductive.

That the Council was not representative of the community was readily apparent and was mentioned frequently at the meetings. In June, two teachers proposed that a ballot be distributed to parents and teachers of all children at the school so that a vote could be taken on the function of the Council. The ballot offered three alternatives: that the Council play an active role in implementing programmes; that it play an advisory role to the administration; and that it be disbanded altogether.

Consideration of the motion was deferred, however, since a committee had been formed at an earlier meeting charged with the responsibility of drafting a constitution for the Council, "...to include aims, structure, procedure and other problems." (Park School/Community Council, Minutes, June 7, 1971). This committee had been set up in response to another ongoing problem -- organization. By April with the executive meeting once a week and presenting formulated policies to the general meeting, there was discussion of restructuring the meetings so that "...those attending feel more involved than as spectators watching an executive body of fifteen." (Park School/Community Council, Minutes, April 5, 1971).

The Ad Hoc Committee met frequently over the summer of 1971 and issued a brief report in September. Designed to be a set of starting points for discussion rather than a list of "hard" recommendations, the report outlined a plan to restructure the executive to include seven parents, two principals, five teachers and the school social worker as voting members,

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with the ward's trustees, the district inspector and a member of the Task Force serving as advisory members without voting privileges. Also foreseen was the possible addition of temporary, non-voting associate members who could take part in executive meetings while working on specific projects in the school. The responsibilities of the expanded executive would include clarification of policy, keeping attendance records, planning procedures and finding ways of involving students, while serving as a "sounding board for staff, parents and students, to identify issues for the Council to consider." It would bring all issues to the full Council, but would not act as a "censor or screen that decides for the Council what they shall and shall not consider as important."

The report suggested that the goal of the Council should be to work "toward developing guidelines for the curriculum that is taught in the school," and that statements should be drafted concerning policies on streaming, promotion, reporting procedures and other topics of concern. To implement some of these policies, the formation of additional permanent committees was suggested as "a way of getting a larger number of parents and teachers involved in actual work groups instead of talk, talk, talk by a few people in front of large group meetings."

The Council passed the report's suggestions concerning the responsibilities and powers of the executive in October, but deferred the proposal to expand the executive since some members felt that its membership was already too large to be effective. The following month, the membership was reduced to eight -- one principal, two teachers and five parents.

With the reduction of the executive, the Council passed a series of motions drawn up by the principals which formalized the agenda for general meetings, limited council and executive meetings to one per month (later changed to two per month) and expanded the committee structure to include

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standing committees on Public Relations, Mutual Problems, Language Development, Mathematics, Fund Raising and Special Education. Although it was hoped that a minimum number of teachers (three) and of parents (four) would serve on each committee, this minimum representation was not achieved in many cases, since most parents gravitated toward the special "Donner" Committee* which grew in importance and power during the Council's second year. In this it paralleled the importance in the first year of the Reading Subcommittee.**

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* The Donner Committee is discussed later in the chapter entitled, "Parent Partners in Education": The Donner Project.

** The Reading Subcommittee is discussed in the following chapter entitled, Reading.

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READING

> "...it will be necessary to take some very drastic steps such as the following.
>
> 1. The provision of 'floating' teachers to give individual help to children who need help in weak subjects.
> 2. The starting of special classes for abnormally 'slow' or abnormally 'rapid' children.
> 3. The installation of increased equipment....
> 4. Increasing the amount and improving the character of hand training....
> 5. Increasing the fineness of grading the children so as to make class instruction more nearly individual."
>
> (Park School, 1921, pp. 31-32)

Since the controversy at Park focussed on poor achievement particularly in fundamental skills, the first act of the Council was to ask for an overview of the reading situation. In their presentation to the Council the following week, the principals outlined the programmes then in operation and gave figures showing the levels at which pupils were being taught, revealing that 69.2 per cent of the grade 7 and 63.2 per cent of the grade 8 pupils were being taught below their grade level; the figures for the junior school were similarly unencouraging.

For the long-term improvement of this situation, the Council set up a Reading Subcommittee with responsibility for developing a special language development and reading programme. The Board, in passing the Task Force recommendations on February 25, 1971, agreed that such a programme should be implemented at Park, under the direction of the Council.

But by April, 1971, there was also discussion of some kind of short-term programme which could upgrade the levels of pupils about to enter high school. Before the Council could draw up a firm proposal, however, the Trefann Court group sent a letter to the Board's Management Committee

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citing the reading scores and demanding that something be done. In their letter the four mothers stated:

> "We have heard many excuses as to why our children can't read but we accept none of them. We feel the teachers simply are not being taught to teach reading and the Board should admit this and make changes in teacher training."
>
> (Letter to Management Committee, April 19, 1971)

The Committee's response was to recommend that a "crash programme in reading be instituted...forthwith and continue until the end of the year"; that "district consultants...be utilized"; and that the programme be evaluated at the end of June (Board Minutes, 1971, p. 290). These recommendations were to be put to the Board at its April 27th meeting.

On April 26th the senior school principal explained to the Council that all pupils were to have been retested at the end of May, but that due to the publicity surrounding the Management Committee's recommendations, standardized tests had been administered to grade 8 pupils on April 22 - 23. The results indicated that an overall upgrading had occurred with 52.8 per cent of the pupils reading at the grade 8 level or better. Despite these figures, the Council voted to support the "crash programme" recommendation. In contrast to the Trefann letter, the Council's resolution declared

> "We feel our teachers are putting forward a great effort on the children's behalf, and our asking for extra help in no way reflects on their competence. Parents are satisfied that the teachers are doing their best with existing facilities -- yet there still exists a desperate need for an even more intensive programme in language and reading."

The "Intensified" Programme

The idea of a crash programme was not received with great enthusiasm by most administrative officials, their view being that a two-month

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programme could have little effect on skills which are cumulative from birth. A few others, however, particularly those connected with the Task Force, felt that the people of the area needed some definite act, if only an act of faith, to show them that the Board cared about so many pupils leaving the school with so few reading skills.

Trustees were divided on the question as well, with one declaring the plan to be a "fraud on the public" (Toronto Star, April 30, 1971). The majority, however, accepted the recommendation for the "crash" programme, discreetly changing the wording to read "intensified." The recommendations were amended to include the provision of a student control group for evaluation purposes, and to state that the special programme be designed by the Language Study Centre, in consultation with the Park Council.

The lukewarm response of many officials was not evident in the manner by which the Language Study Centre became involved. The Director of the Centre was at the school the day after the Board's endorsement of the programme, assessing the situation and consulting with school personnel; proposals were presented to the Council three days later; and a committee of four parents was formed to work with him and to report back to the Council.

After diagnosis by reading specialists, the pupils reading at grades 5 to 7 levels were divided into groups, while those reading at the grade 3 and 4 levels were taught individually. Apart from working with these pupils, the consultants also worked with homeroom teachers as resource personnel. Materials for the programme were chosen in the hope of overcoming a very negative attitude toward reading. Consultants who kept a day-to-day record of their work reported pupil comments such as:

> 'I'll come and I'll do what you say, but I won't read."
> "I hate reading."
> "Get me the book and I MIGHT read it."
> "Are you kidding? Go to a library? You've got to be crazy." (pp. 11-12)*

* Report to the Management Committee, November 26, 1971.

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In the Evaluation Report, the consultants noted that these negative attitudes were the basic problem. The seven students with very low scores they found "willing to read but troubled with a variety of handicaps and a history of failure," while the others were "apparently unwilling rather than unable to read" (p. 13). Although the consultants sensed an improvement in attitudes over the two months, the tests administered at the end of the programme wiped out even that small success.

In accordance with the Board's recommendations, a control group was found among poor readers from four other schools in different areas of the City and both these pupils and the Park pupils were tested in April and at the end of June. The results, as prepared by the Research Department, were interpreted

> "...by saying that the intensified programme had a very modest effect on test performances and that this modest effect was most discernible among the group of students who did poorly, rather than very poorly on the pre-test." (p. 7)

This section of the report noted that the pupils tested "had a record of poor test performance," and that the administration of the second tests, particularly in the hot, sticky, last week of June "must have been viewed almost as a punishment." (p. 3). In the words of one consultant, when the pupils arrived to be tested,

> "...the roof collapsed....The tests were, in all cases left incomplete and they didn't care about the results or how the results would affect them." (p. 11)

On this discouraging note the "intensive" programme ended, with doubts still expressed as to whether any good was achieved by the programme, and, if so, whether the good outweighed the harm done to the children who were thrust into the spotlight.

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The Reading Subcommittee

With the failure of the "quick" solution, more importance was attached to the Reading Subcommittee which met from February to June, 1971. Its first meetings were clouded by the same hostility which then characterized the Council's discussions. Parents damned the kindergarten as a total waste of time and loaded the blame for poor achievement onto "unqualified" teachers: teachers felt these comments to be insulting and said so. But opinions softened as the meetings progressed and as concrete suggestions were offered by members of the committee and guest speakers.

George Martell, an editor of This Magazine is About Schools and a founding member of the Council, proposed the writing of new textbooks based on life as lived in the local neighbourhood, rather than in the green expanses of suburbia; Audrey Goldfinch, a teacher from the United States who had taught in a community-controlled school in New York City, spoke of the value of having parents from the community working in the classrooms and of the necessity of thorough medical and dental check-ups; Carl Bereiter of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education spoke about the "phonics" approach to reading; and Don Rutledge of the Language Study Centre emphasized the need to build on the child's own experience with language, rather than rejecting his language and, by extension, rejecting him.

In developing these ideas into a comprehensive programme, the committee faced a number of problems which seriously hampered its effectiveness. Two of these problems were the same two which bedeviled the Council -- the lack of a definition of its powers and widely fluctuating attendance; another was the initiation of language programmes by the administration without reference to the committee. These problems were outlined in a report to the Council issued in June by the parent and two teachers who had served as co-ordinators of the committee, rather than by the committee itself. In the absence of

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direction, definition and co-ordination, the report offered only general recommendations, leaving open for further discussion the design of the comprehensive programme.

The report insisted on thorough medical examinations of all pupils as a prelude to any reading programme and recommended that the Council support local efforts to establish a community clinic. For the school itself, the report called for the hiring of two teacher aides per classroom to assist in the teaching of fundamental skills, and for the development of a teacher training programme which would cover both the effective use of aides and the effective use of whatever teaching method (Distar, Open Court) was selected. For early identification of reading problems, the report suggested that reading readiness tests be administered to children entering junior or senior kindergarten and grade 1; that standardized reading tests be administered twice a year; that diagnostic tests be given to poor readers, with immediate remedial action; and that teachers make regular performance checks, the results of which would be available to both staff and parents. Other recommendations included the provision of special rooms for a "withdrawal" programme for very poor readers and the formation of a committee of teachers, parents and principals to choose books for individual classroom libraries.

By September, 1971, a number of these recommendations had already been implemented. Developmental tests had been administered in June to junior and senior kindergarten pupils by a team under the guidance of the Director of the Kindergarten Department, and placement in kindergarten and grade 1 had been made on the basis of these tests; the "withdrawal" teachers, who in the 1970-71 school year had had to do most of their work in regular classrooms, hallways, or any other space available, had been provided with special rooms; and bi-monthly conferences had been organized at which the Director of the Kindergarten Department, consultants and other

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resource personnel met with parents, teachers and lay assistants to discuss the primary and junior programmes.

The Park Brief*

All the recommendations of the Reading Committee were incorporated in a brief presented to the Board of Education in November. The brief, entitled Downtown Kids Aren't Dumb; They Need a Better Programme, offered much more than a simple recitation of the committee's proposals, however, for on October 1, an article had appeared in the Toronto Star in which a Board trustee was quoted as saying to the Management Committee that children from downtown areas were "less bright" than other children, and that this was a result of the lack of intelligence of their parents. A member of the Park Council who had attended the meeting reported that the Superintendent of Public Schools and a representative of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, had been in basic agreement with the trustee's position, the Federation representative adding the comment "you can't race donkeys against horses."

Reaction in the Council to these statements ranged from anger to wearily resigned indifference; the response was to create an "Intelligence" Committee to produce a statement for the Board. For part of this statement, the researcher from the Task Force undertook to review the literature concerning "innate" ability and its relation to school success, although, for a number of personal reasons, this project was not completed.

The following week, on the recommendation of the Intelligence Committee, the Council passed a motion calling for a special meeting to be

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* Reprinted in This Magazine is About Schools, Fall-Winter, 1971.

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held at which the three men could discuss their positions. The trustees for the ward and the education writer for the Toronto Star, were to be invited also. Although the OSSTF representative accepted, the other two declined the invitation, with the result that the meeting was cancelled and the energies of the committee members were re-focussed on drafting a statement.

The lengthy brief eventually presented to Council for approval began by accusing the three men of slandering the children of Park and other downtown schools. Their attitudes were described as "the tip of a great iceberg of prejudice in our schools," the end result of which was to "keep poor kids, working class kids, at the bottom of the society, where their parents have been" (p. 3). The brief reviewed the findings of The Every Student Survey, relating to the "bottom stream" of the educational system (i.e. special education classes), then looked at the "top stream" by listing figures compiled by a professor from York University giving the percentages of grade 12 students entering university from various Toronto secondary schools. The figures showed that 15% or less of the students who attended commercial or technical schools, to which Park "sent 36% of her 1971 graduates"(p. 8), continued on to university.

In searching for the reason why "all those poor and working class children ended up in the bottom stream and not on the top" (p. 9), the brief quoted the 1970 report on Opportunity Classes regarding classifications such as "educable mentally retarded," "very limited ability" and "slightly below average," and concluded that 30 to 50% of Park's students, given their placement in Special Education or Vocational schools, must have been diagnosed as fitting into one of these categories. This, the brief maintained, was saying much the same thing as the trustee had said. The brief noted, however, that while the trustee's explanation was that "'limited ability' is a matter of genetics,"

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the explanation of the report was "the environment of poverty [which] results in poor children becoming permanently inferior" (p. 12).

In an analysis of the 1970 report, the brief concluded that while the report had admitted that the school system was

> "...fundamentally unjust to poor children, imposing criteria which don't recognize their full potential and which deny the realities of their lives." (p. 14)

by classifying them as below average only in their ability to learn middle-class concepts, it had then turned around and had maintained that the system was not unjust, that it was doing its best for poor children through the inner city programme, and that the problem was one of communication. The brief rejected the report's suggestions and asked for immediate reforms rather than more research reports.

> "What we want, in fact, are the 'bandaids' your report so casually dismissed. But real bandaids, not trivial ones. Because you see, the alternative to real bandaids is not another 'concerned' look at the 'underlying problems.' It's an explosion of the kind you don't have to go very far south to witness." (p. 17)

The minimal reforms outlined by the brief were the Reading Committee's recommendations and two additional requests: that the Board and the Director of Education make clear statements that "our children have the same potential to learn as any child in this city, and that they will no longer be treated as if this were not the case" (p. 18); and that the Board hold a special meeting "at Park School to discuss the issues raised in this brief" (p. 18).

While many people in the Council, particularly teachers, objected to the tone of the brief (the Minutes describe the discussion as "lengthy and stormy"), its substance was endorsed by a vote of 27 to 17, and was presented to the Management Committee on November 16, 1971.

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The Board Meets at Park

To discuss the brief's recommendations, the Board of Education agreed to hold a special meeting at Park on January 31, 1972. After discussions among members of the Council and between a ward trustee and the newly-elected Chairman of the Board, it was decided that the meeting would be a formal convening, with an hour set aside for discussion. As such, a quorum of thirteen trustees was required to be in attendance.

The meeting was well publicized in local shops and in the media, and a great effort was made to draw as many people as possible. Summaries of the Park Brief were distributed prior to the meeting and were available, along with excerpts from The Little Red Schoolbook, at the door to the school's gymnasium. The drive for attendance had been successful -- four hundred people were assembled as the time for the meeting approached. But the people faced only twelve trustees, not enough to call the Board into formal session. From this low point the meeting proceeded to run downhill.

Interpreting the lack of a quorum as symbolic of the Board's disinterest in their problems, the audience became more restless and hostile as discussion progressed. In the early part of the informal session, questions centred on "innate" ability. The Director of Education stated that there were "bright kids and slow kids" in both rich and poor areas, but that "the balance is on the side of the wealthy areas" (The Globe and Mail, February 1, 1972), basically because poor children come to kindergarten with less highly developed verbal skills than do middle-class children. This, he explained, could be attributed to less emphasis on reading in working-class homes or to poorer pre-natal care. This answer did not go down well with some members of the audience who replied that poor achievement was really a reflection of the poor quality of the teachers in downtown schools.

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Dealing with the specific recommendations of the Park Brief, discussion of the hiring of teacher aides revolved around the cost of such a programme and whether the aides would be hired for all inner city schools or only for the "inner" inner city schools (those with six or more "plusses" on the criteria outlined in the June 1970 report); medical check-ups and teacher training were said to be the responsibility of the Board of Health and the Teachers' Federation, respectively; funds for classroom libraries were said to be unavailable because of budget cuts imposed by the province; standardized tests were said to be inadequate and possibly harmful if administered too often; and "withdrawal" programmes were said to be already in operation on a large scale.

Most of these answers were deemed unsatisfactory by members of the audience who saw in them an example of frantic buck-passing. Denunciations, boos and catcalls became more frequent, as anger and hostility were spurred on both by the answers of the officials and by the strict interpretation of the rules of procedure by which the necessary thirteenth trustee, arriving shortly after nine o'clock, was declared to be too late to rescue the meeting from its "adjourned" status. With the atmosphere quickly degenerating (a few observers feared that the gathering was on the verge of becoming a riot), a ward trustee moved that the trustees present at least go on record as favouring the brief's recommendations. The Chairman, declaring the proceedings to be a "wild meeting," called for a vote on whether or not there should be a vote on the recommendations. Only the two Ward 7 Trustees voted in favour of the vote, and the trustees quickly left the gymnasium to sustained booing.

The brief's recommendations were designated the first priority of the Fundamental Skills Committee created by the Board in March, where,

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as of August, 1972, they were still under consideration. Prior to this, there was a move to hold another meeting at Park, preferably with a quorum, but many trustees, not used to such open hostility, had been unnerved by the meeting, which was most charitably described as a fiasco. Only seven trustees voted in favour of holding another. This decision did little to assuage the anger felt by many of the parents and teachers who had attended the meeting; neither did the appearance of The Chairman's Letter of February 15 (No. 8) in which he referred to the "truly magnificent crowd of some 400" as "sounding like a poorly trained Greek Chorus doing the 'angry mob' scene."

A letter from a representative of the Council was sent to the Board on February 26 criticizing the Chairman for distortion of fact and levity of opinion in light of the "very serious problems facing our children in downtown schools." The letter also defended the two ward trustees from what were interpreted as the slighting remarks made in the newsletter about their motives in voting for a vote on the recommendations, and, in closing, suggested that the Chairman "return to the Hart House Debating Society, whose members will appreciate his talent for learned trivia."

Back to the Council went a letter from the Chairman, apologizing for his remarks concerning the two trustees, but maintaining that his attempts at humour should not be confused with arrogance, indifference or cynicism. In closing, he asked to meet with the Council in an "atmosphere of mutual concern" rather than "in a staged atmosphere of tension." This meeting which eventually took place at the end of May, 1972, was relatively quiet and subdued, and was followed by a Chairman's letter appreciative of the parents' role in the school and of the apparently good relationship between the staff, administration and parents.

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"PARENT PARTNERS IN EDUCATION": THE DONNER PROJECT

> "...the world in selected phases can be taken into the school to give meaning and motive to its processes, to give reality to the content of its curricula, and to provide a touchstone for testing the worth-whileness and soundness of its aims."
>
> (Park School, 1921, p. 35)

As the Board prepared to meet at Park, eight area parents were completing a training programme preparing them to begin work in the school's classrooms. They were the first group of parents employed under the "Parent Partners in Education" Project.

In the autumn of 1970, discussions took place between members of the Task Force, Board officials and school personnel, revolving around possible programmes which could be developed for Park, programmes which could improve learning at the school as well as alleviate the often bitter hostility which clouded school-community relations.

One of the earliest of these discussions was between the Task Force Chairman and the Director of Education. At their meeting, the Director suggested that, given the massive cuts in education budgets, an outside source of funding might have to be found for whatever project was developed. In considering such sources, attention focussed on the Donner Canadian Foundation, a philanthropic organization founded in 1950 by American millionaire William Henry Donner. A contact with the foundation was found in a former Director of Research for the Toronto Board of Education, now with the Canadian International Development Agency and a member of the Donner Foundation's Board of Governors. With no specific project in mind, the Director and the Task Force Chairman met with him in Ottawa in November, 1970 and discussed the nature of proposals which the Foundation might be interested in funding.

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An idea for a particular project came out of an early meeting of the Council. Reviewing the reading situation at the school, the principals listed the resources available which then included eight volunteers working part-time in the classrooms. One of the suggestions on how to improve the situation and best utilize the resources was to involve more community people as volunteers. But few in the community could devote a great deal of time to volunteer work, and the suggestion then arose that parents could give more time and be more effective if they were paid for their work at a rate comparable to that for lay assistants. This was also seen as offering the possibility of mutually "plugging-in" the school and community.

The decision was made to try to expand the volunteer programme immediately and to hope for later funding. Over the next two months the Council identified questions which would have to be answered before such a programme could be implemented -- questions concerning the selection of the "paid parent teacher aides" (who would select them and according to what criteria), their training, their duties in the classroom, and methods of evaluating their effect. On April 5, 1971, over 75 parents and teachers met to vote on a ballot incorporating a variety of answers to these questions.

The most important question, of course, was who would pay the parent aides. The Board, in adopting recommendations of the Task Force on February 25, 1971, had authorized the Director of Education "to solicit and accept funds from outside organizations and foundations for use in setting up special projects" (Board Minutes, 1971, p. 120). In mid-March, two weeks after the junior school principal and Council representatives met with the member of the Donner Foundation's Board to discuss the parent plan, the Council set up a committee of four parents and five teachers to work with

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the Task Force's researcher, seconded from the Toronto Board's Research Department, on a proposal for the Donner Foundation.

With the Task Force researcher taking on the role of architect, the committee suggested features which would be included in the propcsal. The first draft was based mainly on the preliminary recommendations of the Reading Subcommittee. It envisioned an "across-the-board attack on the manifold and complex dimensions of the problems inherent in the teaching and learning of reading," with the major emphasis being on the diagnosis of reading problems and the development of both curative and preventative programmes to deal with them. A major component of this plan was an ambitious in-service training programme for teachers revolving around reading methods. Parents were seen as working toward the status of "true paraprofessionals" through a training procedure of formal instruction and on-the-job training. They would work under the direction of the teacher, thereby freeing her to devote more time to individual and small group instruction. A conscious social component was also featured in that the "trained paraprofessional" status would create a new occupational role for inner city residents.

The draft was circulated by the Task Force researcher over the next few months and was gradually reshaped as various people offered suggestions. The member of the Donner Foundation's Board of Governors, before the proposal became so far advanced as to cause a possible conflict of interest with his position, made various suggestions, particularly relating to the possible use of non-print media. Other suggestions came from Task Force personnel, members of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and the Toronto Board of Education staff.

As it evolved, the scope of the proposal broadened so as to put the reading issue in context. It came to include a review of the controversies surrounding education over the past decade in North America generally and in Toronto in particular.

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In discussing the literature pertaining to the "increasing perception of massive failure" (p. 3)* on the part of centrally controlled urban schools, the proposal reviewed Callahan's Education and the Cult of Efficiency (1962) and Hulburd's This Happened in Pasadena (1951) to pinpoint the "basic wrong turn in the road that led to our present dilemma" -- the development, over fifty years ago, of "unit control patterns...which excluded all others except professional educators" who were responsible only to boards of education composed of laymen, a development which led to "the lack of communication, achievement of consensus, and collaboration between professionals and the communities in the work of education." (p. 3).*

Reviewing more recent studies on the resolution of school disputes, the document reported that

> "Experience in one city revealed that unilateral innovation, no matter how sincere the motivation of its architects, runs the risk of alienating people even when the innovation is presumably for their benefit. In another city it was found that public participation was the main element in determining the success of a new programme." (p. 3)*

Unfortunately, in his haste to submit the proposal to the Foundation prior to the spring meeting of its Board of Governors, the Task Force researcher also fell into the trap of unilateral innovation. With the help of professional educators from the Board, the Task Force and OISE, he proposed a unique solution to the failings of mass education. But neither the Council nor the committee which it had set up to work with him knew what that solution was.

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* The Park School/Community Council of Toronto and The Task Force on School/Community Education. A Proposal To The Donner Canadian Foundation, 1971.

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On June 14, 1971, the Council was informed that major changes had been made in the first draft of the proposal and that it had been submitted to the Foundation. A meeting was immediately called to discuss the changes and to determine whether the Council could support the document in its new form, the result of which was a decision to ask the Foundation to return the proposal for further consideration by an expanded Donner Committee. The committee held many meetings, often lasting all day and into the night, at which the changes were explained and others were suggested. Not until September was the proposal re-submitted to the Foundation.

The Proposal

As submitted, the proposal identified the basic problem at Park and other inner city schools as being that "the school and the home pursue conflicting practices of child-rearing arising out of differing value systems and life styles" (p. 7). It expressed the belief that no matter how up-to-date or discriminating the methods of teaching, learning would suffer so long as the values of the home and the school do not "respect and reinforce each other." (p. 8).

The reading programme, which had been the major element of the original proposal was now seen in the wider context as a vehicle for the development of "a process to reshape the educational environment of Park School, and its community, through the collaboration of parents and school staff in 'learning teams'." (p. 11). Parents were seen as the key to the problem of bridging the "cultural divide" created when the children of working-class families studied a curriculum predicated on and dedicated to the inculcation of middle-class values.

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Parents were no longer to be placed in an auxiliary or subordinate role, there simply for the purpose of allowing the teacher to cover the curriculum more thoroughly or on a more individual basis. Rather, they were to be full and equal partners in "learning teams," working with teachers and other community people "on programmes and policies that are uniquely designed to meet the needs of their particular children, school and community" (p. 11).

The proposal outlined its aims and philosophy:

> "1. Parents and the home are the primary influences and major 'teachers' of children. The role of the school as a supportive, stimulating, and contributing resource for the learner as he has been shaped by his family is therefore at least as important as the teaching of academic subjects and must receive equal attention and effort.
>
> 2. The collaboration of parents and teachers in the development of a learning programme can help children bridge the gap which now exists between the life styles of home and school. It is hoped that the child will then be better able to cope with conflicting expectations, values and behaviour patterns instead of rebelling, withdrawing or manipulating the adults in his life.
>
> 3. The children's self-esteem, ego development and sense of hope will be improved by observing their parents and other community members as respected members of the educational endeavour.
>
> 4. As the result of this teacher-parent partnership, the curriculum will come to reflect the needs of residents of the community related to family structure, employment status, and aspirations for themselves and their children.
>
> 5. Educational programmes should provide a two-way flow of experience and learning materials (books, tapes, equipment) between the school and the home so as to bring learning back into the family and into the school.
>
> 6. The project may help build a community life around positive, healthy neighbourhood goals rather than around grievances, fighting for survival, and conflict with the school and other social agencies."
>
> (A Proposal to the Donner Canadian Foundation, 1971, pp. 11-12)

With the help of extra resources from the Board of Education as a supplement to the proposed Donner grant for salaries and equipment, and

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with the involvement of personnel from other educational, medical and social agencies, the project hoped to achieve these aims over a two-year period divided into three phases.

In the first phase of the project -- January to June, 1972 -- eight parents and teachers would "explore the potentialities of the learning team concept" while "mobilizing resources within the school and the community" (pp. 13-14) to develop procedures and skills.

Phase two -- September, 1972 to February, 1973 -- would "involve the development of both processes and curriculum content." (p. 17). Eight more parents would begin working in the classrooms, roles and relationships would be consolidated and expanded into curriculum development, and the "partners" would begin sharing their experiences with the community and with other Toronto schools.

Phase three -- March to December, 1973 -- would see the number of parents in the classrooms double again to thirty-two. The emphasis in this phase would be on "demonstrating and disseminating the achievement of quality education in inner-city schools by parent-teacher teams." (p. 17).

Designed as a pilot project of "genuine and meaningful community participation," the plan held out the hope of restoring "credibility and public support of the schools," of demonstrating "the greater effectiveness of working with homes, families and neighbourhoods in the administration of a large school system," and of defining "a means by which social institutions...can release the energy, intelligence and creativity of lay people to work and contribute towards activities in which they share a vital stake with professionals." (p. 19).

The proposal asked for a grant of $129,000 for the salaries of parents and resource personnel, and for special equipment to produce learning materials -- videotape recorders, cameras, cassette recorders and typewriters.

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In its proposed budget it also included tentative financial commitments from the Board of Education.

After the proposal had been re-submitted, the president of the Foundation, and an assistant, visited the school and talked to parents and teachers. They also met with members of the Task Force and with the Donner Committee, which exhibited a rare display of unanimity. In the process, the two became enthusiastic supporters of the project.

In December, the Foundation granted $82,600 to the Board of Education to be set aside in a special account for use at Park School. While contributing funds for parent salaries at the rate of $2.00 per hour, the Foundation left it open for the Board to augment this rate to the $3.50 level asked for in the proposal. This had already been accomplished as the Board had voted on November 25, 1971, to contribute up to $18,000 to the project. Although the Director of Education was nominally responsible for all funds granted for the programme, he assured the Council on January 10, that he had no desire to "run the show" and that the funds would be disbursed with the guidance and co-operation of the Council.

Organization

In late November, the Donner Committee met to devise plans for implementing the project. A number of subcommittees were formed, each with a particular area of responsibility -- Business Management, Selection, Training, Evaluation and Communications. Another subcommittee suggested at the time would have been responsible for the overall co-ordination of the project. (The proposal itself had budgeted for an individual Co-ordinator, but the establishment of such a position had met with resistance in the Donner Committee meetings. A Co-ordinating Committee met with the same

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resistance until March, 1972.) All subcommittees met over December and reported to the full committee, empowered by the Council to make decisions about the work of its subcommittees, in January.

The volunteer programme of the previous year provided experience and precedents for the Selection and Training Committees. The criteria for selection which were decided by the April balloting were that aides be either male or female; be at least twenty years of age; be mature, responsible persons; be interested in and like children; have a good command of oral English, reading, writing and spelling; successfully complete a training programme; and treat all school matters confidentially. Academic qualifications were deemed unnecessary. Selection would be the responsibility of a small screening committee made up of members of the Council, teachers, and a principal, who would choose the aides from among Park parents as a first choice, then from among other members of the community, then from among people outside the community if necessary.

As set up by the Selection Subcommittee, the interviewing team was composed of the senior school principal, one teacher from the Donner Committee who had had experience with volunteers, and one parent from the Council who was not directly involved with the project except as a member of the committee. This team administered an interview schedule which included additional criteria set by the Selection Subcommittee. The members agreed that previous experiences relating to school or other volunteer work should be taken into consideration. Also, at the instigation of parents and after much discussion, they agreed that tests should be administered. Two tests were drawn up, one testing basic mathematical skills (addition, subtraction, division, multiplication, simple algebra and geometry), the other asking for written answers to questions regarding opinions on the role of parent aides in communication between the school and community and on their role within the total school programme.

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On the interview schedule, test results counted for twenty points; experience for ten points; personality and attitude towards school generally and to the Donner programme particularly, ten points; oral language and speech, five points; and appearance and manner, five points, for a total of fifty.

To notify prospective aides, flyers outlining the project were sent out by the school and by the Regent Park Community Improvement Association, and interested parents were asked to fill out an application form at the school office. The twenty parents who applied were then contacted by 'phone and interview times were arranged. Although eleven parents were to be selected for the training programme, the interviewing team was to make clear to the applicants that only eight would be employed in the first phase. These eight were required to sign an agreement that all school matters would remain confidential, with the understanding that breach of the agreement would lead to termination of employment. They were also required to sign an agreement with the Board of Education which outlined the medical, legal and monetary conditions of employment.

Like the Selection Subcommittee, the Training Subcommittee built on the experiences of the volunteer programme of the previous June. The programme devised at that time consisted of five morning sessions over a three-week period during which specialists gave talks on various parts of the school programme. Since the volunteers were used mainly in the primary grades, two mornings were devoted to the philosophy of kindergarten and the educational value of play; one morning to interpreting test results, particularly the developmental tests; one morning to problems children may have, particularly the causes and manifestations of behavioural problems; and one morning to the overall school programme. Each session involved classroom observation and discussion as well as the speakers' presentations.

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For the "paid parent aides," the Training Subcommittee planned a broader, more intensive programme. The aim of the two-week programme was to give a long-range view of the educational process from kindergarten to grade 8 using films and slides as well as specialist speakers, many of whom had been involved in the previous programme. Lectures were given by members of the Kindergarten Department, Student Services and the Language Study Centre, by the Inspector for the District, and by art, music and mathematics teachers. Also included in the programme were visits to the other schools, some of which were operating volunteer programmes, and a tour of Park School with observation by groups of parents in half-a-dozen classrooms. Individual observation in the classes to which they were assigned was not included. Although a training programme for teachers centering on the effective use of aides had been suggested, the teachers involved attended only a few discussions during the lunch hour and after school, since the administration felt that withdrawing teachers from their classrooms to take part in such a programme would place too great a strain on the regular schedule. As a result, there was little preconsultation between teachers and parents. The parent-teacher teams were paired on the last Friday of the training period and on the following Monday the parents began working in the classrooms.

Parents in the Classroom

It was originally planned that the parent aides would be placed one to a class with the total number distributed equally among four areas, two parents in each of the primary, junior, intermediate and special education divisions. This formula was subject to the number of teacher requests for aides. The school staff was polled by the administration and eight teachers, seven in the junior school and one in the senior, indicated that they would

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be willing to have a parent aide. Others indicated that they would be willing in the second or third phases of the project. Eventually, the parents were placed in the junior and senior kindergartens, grades 1 to 5, the library and the senior school Special Programme.

The administration set down only one guideline for the parent-teacher teams -- that the parents could not, except in an emergency, be left in charge of the class. Apart from this, the parents and teachers were left on their own to develop a working relationship and to work out the tasks which each would perform.

Because there had been little prior consultation, parents were unsure of what teachers expected of them, while teachers were unaware of the parents' potential. Three of the parents who had been involved in the volunteer programme had, of course, already overcome this uncertainty. For the others there was little to do but sit down with the teachers and talk. Discussions were on a direct, one-to-one basis with teachers explaining the class programme, outlining their procedures and discussing their general philosophy of teaching. A few of the parents also watched the teachers for a few days in order to become fully oriented and to gain enough confidence to become completely involved in the class routine.

The specific duties which parents performed varied from class to class and changed as the teacher-parent relationship evolved and matured. For the most part, parents came to perform the same tasks as the teachers, with the exception of initiating new concepts. Clerical duties were often shared, as were the so-called "menial" tasks (mixing paints, cleaning brushes, etc.). This was particularly true in the kindergartens with the myriad tasks which arose daily. At the instructional level, parent tasks included listening to and reading stories, marking (mostly straight answer), checking

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seat work, and conducting math and spelling drills. Parents also brought new ideas to the class, devising social studies projects or inventing new learning games.

All parents worked with both individual pupils and groups, depending on circumstances. Most worked with larger groups while the teacher gave more attention to the low-achievement pupils, but this, too, varied from class to class. One team, for example, found that they could work more effectively with slow learners if the parent, for whom mathematics was a "breeze," worked with groups of slow readers, while the teacher, who specialized in reading, worked with mathematics groups. They had found that neither had great patience in their own "easy" areas.

There were few problems in defining roles. Teachers retained the role of disciplinarian, although a few delegated a small degree of this authority so as not to be continually playing the "heavy." On the part of the pupils there was even less confusion about the roles. The parents were readily accepted and, although all adults in the classroom were usually referred to as "teacher," the pupils had an intuitive grasp of the hierarchy. What was not discerned through intuition was found by probing responses, first asking a question of the parent, then asking the teacher if the parent's answer was found unsatisfactory. All teachers and parents encountered this reaction early on in the programme and learned to deal with it quickly. Pupils came to be quite sure that ultimate authority resided with the teacher.

Any problems which arose were dealt with through informal discussions between teacher and parent or during meetings with the administration. All parents in the programme met as a group with the junior school principal once a week to discuss the problems they had encountered, and finding these problems to be common to all helped the parents overcome them. But, after a few months the meetings were cancelled at the suggestion of the parents, who didn't want to spend so much time away from the classroom!

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As the first phase of the project came to a close, everyone involved looked forward to the second phase, pleased that the first had worked so well, pleased with themselves and with each other.

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> "The word 'culture' has been so thoroughly misunderstood in the past and has been given so narrow a meaning that the use of this term in educational discussions has contributed not a little to lack of apparent harmony where real harmony existed, and to delaying progressive action through verbal warfare."
>
> (Park School, 1921, p. 35)

June, 1972 saw the end of the first phase of the Parent Partners Project, the end of other projects associated with Park for the past two years, and the departure of a number of key personnel: the Task Force issued its final report in April and was officially dissolved by the Board on July 27; the resource personnel assigned to Park by the Student Services Department were withdrawn; the social worker assigned to the school in 1970 left the Board (as did the Task Force researcher six months earlier); the principal of Park Senior was appointed to another school; and the principal of Park Junior was promoted to the new position of Assistant Area Superintendent for the area which includes Park.

With the outflow of key personnel, it remains to be seen whether the structures and procedures developed over the past two years are firm enough to overcome the problems which the school still faces. By giving in to a creeping sense of déjà vu and looking back over fifty years, it might be assumed that Park's problems have a habit of not going away. But a start has been made on solutions, and among the people involved there is a feeling that there has been some success.

The "Donner" Project

The major success thus far has been the Parent Partners Project. In interviews conducted in June, 1972, everyone involved expressed the feeling

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that the programme has been beneficial in a number of ways. With the exception of those in the special cases of the library and junior kindergarten, where the same criteria do not really apply, all teachers and parents felt that their pupils had learned more and that their behaviour and attitudes toward school had improved, mainly as a result of having another adult in the classroom.

For most teachers, the presence of a parent aide has meant a decreased workload. One teacher, however, felt that the workload had increased in other ways to compensate for the initial decrease, while another, in an application of Parkinson's Law, felt that the workload had expanded to absorb all personnel available for its completion. Five of the teachers reported an alteration in their classroom methods, due mainly to increased work with individual pupils and small groups. Of the other three, one was, again, the special case of the library; another had previously worked with a lay assistant; and the third felt that her methods would likely change when the parent had spent a full year with the class.

Most of the teachers also reported that they could cover a greater part of the curriculum more effectively and at a quicker rate with the parent in the room. As to curriculum content, two teachers reported that it had changed to include more elements relevant to the local community, while three of the five who reported no change felt that it would change in the 1972-73 year.

The programme has also been beneficial in altering the attitudes parents and teachers had toward one another. Four teachers reported that their attitudes toward the community, parents and pupils had changed positively as a result of the better understanding gained from their contact with parents; the four others had been involved with parents previously through work on the Council and had already come to view the community in a brighter light. Of

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the parents, three felt that their positive attitudes towards the school and teachers, had been reinforced; the other five reported that their earlier attitudes, highly critical of both the school and teachers, had been altered towards more understanding and respect for teachers and a more favourable view of the school.

At first glance, then, it would appear that at the end of its first phase the project is working exceedingly well. But obscured by the satisfaction is a doubt felt by a few people about whether the project is really fulfilling its potential. Crucial to the Foundation's approval of the proposal was the unique nature of the parents' roles as "equal partners" in the educational process, rather than as aides or subordinates to the teachers. This was seen by the Donner Governors as offering the potential of radically altering the structure of education from within the system itself, by providing a model for the direct flow of information and values from the community into the local school and from the school into the community. But as phase one ends, the parents seem to be functioning in the capacity of "aides" with little movement toward the "partnership" role.

Some reasons have been suggested as to why this movement has not occurred, the most telling being that many people, even the parents and teachers in the programme itself, are unaware of the far-reaching nature of the project and what it is attempting to achieve. For this, some hold the principals responsible, criticizing them for not "pushing" the project or for not fully explaining it in staff meetings; others suggest that it may simply be that the project became so enmeshed in the mechanics of organization that little time was left to fully explore and ponder its philosophy and implications. That said, it should be pointed out that phase one was devoted to "role experimentation" and that five months is a very short time in which to launch such a major project.

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Many of the problems encountered in the first few months may be overcome in phase two when more time is devoted to evaluation. The Evaluation Committee, meeting in December, 1971, and January, 1972, identified five groups about which it wished to gather information: pupils, parent aides, teachers, administrators, and the community. Although attention centred on documenting changes in the attitudes of these groups, seven particular areas of pupil progress were also specified: aspirations, values, self-image, achievement, work habits, behaviour, and attitudes. With the assistance of the Research Department, instruments were developed to measure some of these changes, most of which were administered in the spring of 1972. All the results have yet to be compiled and interpreted; for this and other evaluation projects, the Co-ordinating Committee has allocated funds for the hiring of research personnel from O.I.S.E., one of whom will spend two days per week in the classroom as an observer over the next two phases of the project. Much of this will be "in-house" research for the Donner Committee and the Council, as a basis for periodic reports to the Foundation.

More time will also be devoted in the second phase to dissemination of the project's effectiveness and aims. The Communications Committee has been developing scripts for a videotape production, but final decisions on both content and editing responsibility have yet to be made. One problem faced by this committee was the absence of a co-ordinating body until halfway through the first phase, an absence which hampered the acquisition of equipment. Although some taping took place with the assistance of the School Community Workshop, the recorders and cameras for which the proposal had budgeted were not acquired until very late in the year.

Within the school itself, however, reports of the project's usefulness seem to have already spread. While seven teachers in the junior school and one in the senior school expressed a willingness to have a parent in the

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classroom for phase one, a poll of the staff in June, 1972, revealed that junior school teachers were unanimous in their willingness to have a parent aide in phase two. Among the senior school staff, however, no new teacher requested a parent aide.

Reading

Another area in which there has been some, albeit small, success is the reading programme. In November, 1971, the Council requested reading scores for pupils in both schools. Standardized tests were not administered in the senior school, as the administration felt that they were not useful except for diagnosis of individual students. The junior school principal, however, agreed to administer the tests and to report on the results in May, 1972. The figures given at that time were based on a combination of performance on special tests (standardized tests for grades 3 to 6, teacher-made tests for grades 1 and 2) and teacher evaluation of daily class work, regular test work, and the level of books read daily. As such, they were not really comparable to the previous year's figures which had been based on teacher evaluation of levels at which pupils were taught.

In giving the figures, the principal noted four factors which could have had an effect on the final results: students in special programmes were not included; fifty-nine pupils transferred into the school during the year (forty-six of whom were reading below their grade level); thirty-one New Canadians were learning English as a second language (twenty-eight of whom were reading below their grade level); and absenteeism had been high, particularly in the primary grades. These factors notwithstanding, the figures were considered to be an improvement over the previous year. There were no non-readers in grade 1, for example, and in each year a greater percentage of the children were reading at their grade level. Also, the

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spread of achievement was much wider, particularly in the higher grades -- although 2 per cent of grade 6 pupils were reading at grade 2 level, another 2 per cent were reading at grade 9 level.

Figures were also given for the average gains in reading levels made by pupils in the withdrawal programme, where it was found that the older the child, the greater the gain achieved. While gains for primary pupils were in the order of three to five months, pupils in junior grades gained anywhere from eight months (in grade 4) to one year and six months (in grade 6). To account for this variability, it was suggested that pupils in the higher grades may have realized that they needed help and that they may have been able to adjust to a new teacher and new methods more readily than primary pupils. This was seen as leading to a concentration of remedial resources at the junior level, while the ongoing K-2 programme of consultation and conferences would concentrate on prevention, isolating problems at the primary level. With this two-pronged programme in operation, and with more parents working in the classrooms, there is hope that higher achievement levels will be reached in 1972-73.

The Council

When considering successes, there is some doubt as to whether the School/Community Council should be included. This is not to say that the Council has not achieved much over the past two years; apart from the reading and Parent Partner programmes, the Council has been concerned with drug education, French education, the construction of a new playground, and other projects. But with some results achieved and emotions spent, the Council seems to be in limbo, with attendance at meetings, never great, declining even further.

This cannot be interpreted as a general decline of parent interest in education, however, since that interest can be seen in the reports of

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the Task Force, in the self-survey conducted for the proposed Oak Street School, and in the positive reponse given to junior school teachers who, rather than sending report cards home with their pupils, reported directly to almost all parents in March, 1972, either visiting or telephoning homes, or meeting with the parents in the school. The interest is there; what is needed is a mechanism which can effectively tap it. Among some administrators, teachers, and parents there is a feeling that the Council as presently constituted cannot be that mechanism since it is not, and does not pretend to be, representative of the community.

A number of theories have been advanced to explain why the Council has failed to capture the interest of its natural constituents. One view is that the Council can arouse interest, but only when a "gut" issue is at hand. To support this view, its advocates point to the large turnout when the Park Brief was passed or when it was debated at the special meeting of the Board. That the Council is issue-oriented is widely recognized; indeed, the Council itself tried to recreate the conditions of these successes by holding a series of special meetings on controversial topics. The first of these, on the subject of discipline, was held in April, 1972, but generated so little response and meaningful discussion that the rest of the series was not held.

Another view looks further and notes the organizational problems which the Council has experienced. After the first few meetings it was agreed that firm rules of procedure would have to be adopted in order to contain debates that were so free-wheeling as to be non-productive; then, committees were instituted to decentralize discussion and, hopefully, achieve more fruitful results. But the application of parliamentary procedure and the adoption of the elaborate committee system created a highly structured environment in which many people, both parents and teachers, felt uncomfortable, and to which many people would not come.

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Still another view focusses attention on the committees, for they met almost daily, in endless succession. To the teachers and principals, if only by default, fell the responsibility of organizing the meetings and attending the sessions, through lunches and after school, while still having to cope with the regular timetable. For many concerned, including parents, the formation of committees began a process of attrition by which all interest died.

Looking at one particular committee some see the key to the Council's current doldrums. The Donner Committee, the only one which elicited any great response from parents, became so active that it took off by itself, with little control exercised by the Council. As the Parent Partner Project expands and the number of parent aides increases (and only a few of these parents are involved with the Council), it is argued that the constituency of parents who are working in the school will be more representative and thus more powerful, by virtue of size and daily presence, than the constituency of parents who take part in Council.

But looking back beyond the current malaise, perhaps the most cogent theory can be glimpsed in the model of community school development which appeared in the final report of the Task Force (Appendix D). In this model, which was drawn up using the experience at Park, the formation of a council comes quite late in the process, only after much informal discussion, exploration, planning, organization and acceptance by institutions and agencies. At Park, first discussions led to the formation of a council within two months, and this mechanism for formal discussion had to operate in an atmosphere clouded by bitterness and distrust. Parents had attacked the school system with a bluntness which was a new and unnerving phenomenon for many in that system; parents felt that the system was also blunt in classifying their children as "retarded," particularly after many apparently trouble-free

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years in the school. Searching for scapegoats, attitudes hardened and, although the administration and bureaucracy received their share of attacks, opinions polarized around parents and teachers. At their most extreme, parents saw teachers as condescending, middle-class people who were not competent to teach; while teachers saw parents as uncaring and dull, lacking the ability to create a suitable environment in which their children could grow.

This conflict, and its memory as sustained by the media, continues to keep many away from the Council. Here, a note might be made on the role of the newspapers in the perpetuation of this hostility. The stories on Park School over the past few years have carried headings such as:

-- Opportunity Classes Useless, Mothers Say (The Globe and Mail, February 11, 1970)

-- Park P. S. Problem: Johnny Can't Read (The Globe and Mail, April 21, 1971)

-- Girl in Grade 8 Can't Read Properly and Teachers Don't Care, Mother Says (Toronto Star, April 4, 1970)

-- Parents Urge Crackdown to Ensure Teachers Are Skilled (Telegram, June 23, 1971)

-- Reading Problems at Public School Blamed on Parents (Toronto Star, April 30, 1971)

-- Downtown Kids Less Bright: Trustee (Toronto Star, October 1, 1971).

All these are accurate incapsulations of positions publicly taken by individuals and groups: the newspapers have committed no sins of commission. What have been missing, however, are headings of the "Parents, teachers work together" or "Pupil reading improves" variety. Both these processes have far to go, but both have begun and little has been said about their successes thus far.

Those who have been hurt most by these articles are, of course, the children. The effect can be seen in the children who visit the guidance

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counsellor in greater numbers after the appearance of each article: it can be seen in the comments made to the consultants involved in the intensive reading programme

> "You're the one who's come to teach us stupid kids how to read."
>
> "You're one of the ones we read about in the newspaper."
>
> "We're stupid."

But the effect spreads further, to the community and to the school, in which personal communications are so modestly developed that the media play a central role. Parents who feel that the school is doing its best for their children stay away from a Council which they view as a forum for mudslinging; teachers stay away from a Council which they view as an encampment of head-hunters, eager to slash away at their professional- and self-respect. So they lose the chance to meet, to feel mutually supported, and to know one another.

For the parents and teachers who have been involved with the Council or the Task Force, opinions toward each other have softened, thus enabling what has always been the basic issue, community involvement, to become more clearly defined. Parents, teachers and administrators, as homogeneous groups dedicated to particular ideas, no longer exist, if they ever really did. Rather, members of all groups shift to either side of a political line, generating new extreme opinions. The original combatants remain as nuclei of "professional" parents and "professional" professionals, whose byword is "control," who see the shifting alliances in terms of "converts" and "traitors," and who view each other's actions and motives suspiciously. One side says that the school system is indulging in a public relations "con job," applying layer upon layer of cosmetic involvement to an unchanging system, both biased and bankrupt. The other replies that new programmes, initiated by sincerely motivated educators, are being sabotaged by ideological forces desirous of

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maintaining conflict at an artificially high level, all for the furtherance of the "Revolution." In each other they see the truth of their positions.

But between the fringes is a larger group who agree, if only tacitly, that schools hold too great a place in society for traditional educational procedures to be maintained; that when education takes such a great percentage of public money and when educational qualifications mean so much to the future lives of pupils, the power once acceptably concentrated in a bureaucracy or a school principal becomes, or is perceived to have become, despotic. The issue centres on decision making power, and with the structure of that power in a state of flux, the Council is faced with yet another problem. The debate goes on at the Board, with some holding the view that participation in decision making carries an automatic veto power with it, that someone must alway e "on top"; while the Director of Education, speaking to the Park Council in January, 1972, outlined what the Board has been trying to do to establish a "new pattern of co-operation," and gave his own view that in a community school all interested parties, parents, teachers, administrators and students, could "share in decision making with no one in full control." Until the new pattern is established, the Council will be adrift, unable to define its role in the educational process.

The Principals

For the establishment of this new pattern, many people both within and outside of the school system have been devoting a good deal of thought to the role of the principal, particularly since the Board's adoption of a policy of administrative decentralization. An example is found in a brief submitted by the Social Work Services of the Student Services Department to the joint meeting of the Task Force and Chairman's Committees in May, 1972. Its three main points were:

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> The only meaningful thrust is that which can be generated by the School Principal in collaboration with the community.
>
> The first need is for a strong administrative expectation that school/community development is a high priority task for the Principal.
>
> Principal's tasks [should] be ordered so that much of the present administrative burdens be reduced to free him to co-ordinate the existing resources for problem solving.

These thoughts have relevance to Park, for there, over the past two years, the principals gradually worked out a fairly successful, if not always happy, modus vivendi with the parents. But, made in reaction to pressures emanating from outside the school, the arrangements resulted in a greatly increased administrative load.

That the role of initiator in the process of school community development should fall to the principal with re-defined responsibilities recognizes both the growing consensus on the acceptability of parent participation and the opinion that the school system cannot afford to let suspicion and frustration fester to the point which they did at Park. Action, rather than reaction, must occur if the message to the community is not to be that the only way of bringing about change within the system is by making stridently hostile demands on the school.

The basic problem remains at Park, as at other inner city schools -- children from working-class homes simply do not do as well in school as middle-class children; the correlation between low occupational category and placement in special education programmes has been paralleled by a similar correlation between attendance at inner city schools and both low scores on reading tests and placement in two-year secondary school programmes. The cause of this has been variously attributed to home environment, pre-natal

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care, health, teacher training, teaching methods and ego development, all of which have their place but none of which can be seen as a sole cause.

But, what is generally agreed to be a basic cause, as mentioned in the June, 1970 Report and as documented in the proposal to the Donner Foundation, is that the home and the school in low socio-economic areas are engaged in a conflict of values. The Parent Partners Project, employing parents in the school in a partnership role which has ramifications for administrators, teachers and curriculum development, has the potential to overcome this conflict by providing a real alternative within the system. To Park, that lends a note of hope.